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Letter writing: An alternative approach in teacher education

Guðrún Jónsdóttir¹

Norwegian University of Life Sciences

Eva M. Dyrnes

Østfold University College

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Abstract

Instead of telling student teachers who they should be, we asked them: “Who are you?” We used a narrative approach to explore their own perspectives. The students were invited to share their thoughts and experiences in letter format. This letter-writing assignment was part of the introduction to intercultural school practices as a reoccurring theme in education theory. We viewed the students’ narratives in light of J. P. Gee’s distinction between discourse with lowercase “d” and Discourse with a capital “D.” The students cited their families as being their most important formative factor, facilitating a safe and active childhood. Emphasis was also placed on where they grew up, with nature a mere “Cherrox² [all-weather boot] step away”, and where bicycle locks were unnecessary.

Keywords: Teacher education, intercultural perspective, the letter method, narrative research, discourse/Discourse, majority perspectives.

Introduction

“Please write a letter to a stranger in which you present yourself and what has formed you and made you the person you are today.” This quote originates from a non-graded assignment given to two groups of our student teachers. These students attended a one-year postgraduate programme in Educational Theory and Practice at our two respective institutions.

The national guidelines and pertaining regulations require diversity to be included as a topic in teacher education. This is stated, *inter alia*, in the governing documents for the one-year programme in Educational Theory and Practice, (Kunnskapsdepartementet,

¹ Corresponding author: guðrun.jonsdottir@nmbu.no

² Cherrox is a well-established boot brand in the Nordic countries

2013, 2015). Despite these guidelines, research indicates that Norwegian teachers appear to be poorly prepared to meet pupils from diverse backgrounds. Skrefsrud (2016) referred in this context to two national evaluations from 2006 and 2010. These evaluations concluded that issues of cultural and linguistic complexity are not well integrated into teacher education (Skrefsrud, 2016, pp. 17-18). Norwegian research on the practices and contributions of teacher education programmes to this field is sparse, but international research reported similar findings (Ambe, 2006; Guo, Arthur, & Lund, 2009; Santoro, 2009).

An earlier study based on a focus-group interview of recently graduated teachers from our institutions, revealed that our teaching on the topic of cultural diversity had not affected the students. In the study, we found that they barely reflected on their own cultural frames of reference and took for granted privileges in their own lives. Another important finding was that student teachers regarded the work on cultural diversity as an opportunity to learn about “the other” (Dyrnes, Johansen & Jónsdóttir, 2015). The study served as a wake-up call for us as teacher educators. The following academic year we started a collaboration when it comes to planning and evaluating intercultural school practices as a reoccurring theme in a one-year postgraduate programme in Educational Theory and Practice at our two respective institutions.

The collaboration has several common features of collaborative action research approaches, as it is aiming at improving our practice and contributing to the knowledge base of the field of intercultural school practices in teacher education (Levin & Rock, 2003). In this article, however, we will not discuss the action research project. The empirical material in the article originates from the start-up of the theme. We scrutinize the content of the letters produced in the letter-assignment and discuss how the main topics in the letters might open up discussions on intercultural school practices. Our approach drew on scholars who have raised questions about the way critical viewpoints have been presented to student teachers from a deficit perspective (Lowenstein, 2009; Seidl et al., 2015; Settlege, 2011; Severiens, Wolff, & van Herpen, 2014). Lowenstein also claimed that this deficit perspective appears to build on research that shows how student teachers reacted with resistance, anger or defensiveness to the discussion of their privileges. She called for an alternative approach to student teachers: *from you will! to who are you?* (Lowenstein, 2009, p. 179).

Neither the letters, written by the students or our analysis of them are accounts of reality. However, we see the content of the letters as suited to open up discussions on how personal attitudes and beliefs are shaped by life experiences. Rather than advocating a certain attitude as the “right way” to think about or interrelate with their future students, we hope to invite our student’s teacher to widen their perspectives on what good childhood might be. This was the main point of departure for the study, forming the basis for the following questions:

- What can the letters communicate about who the students are and the experiences they believe have formed them?
- How do the students present themselves in the letters?

- Which cultural frames of reference do the students' narratives appear to draw on?

Materials and methods

Conceptual framework

The core of the intercultural perspective, across fields and contexts, appears to be the emphasis it places on interpersonal interaction, mutual dependence and cooperation (Børhaug & Helleve, 2016; Portera, 2008). We based our preparation for intercultural school practices on this interpretation. However, a review of the literature showed that the intercultural perspective can be problematic. Using the concept of culture can be challenging; the suffix *culture* often overshadows the prefix *inter* (between or across). It thus fails to adequately communicate the fact that humans can be involved in a number of social settings and interactions, where both our cultural affiliation and identity can be renegotiated and reconstructed in meetings with others (Dervin, Paatela-Nieminen, Kuoppala, & Riitaoja, 2012). Vassenden (2011) stated that it is more correct to refer to Norwegianness in the plural Norwegiannesses. In recent years, an understanding has emerged whereby culture and identity are seen as fluid rather than fixed and cemented dimensions (Dervin et al., 2012; Gullestad, 2006). Both culture and identity are important building blocks in the intercultural perspective. This article is based on the fluid understanding of both culture and identity.

We, therefore, chose an approach that emphasised this fluid understanding of identity. In the analyses, we drew on James Paul Gee's (2000) view of identity. He regarded identity as the fact of being recognised as a specific person in a given context (Gee, 2000, p. 100). He also argued that there are different ways of being in the world at different times and places and for different purposes (Gee, 2014, p. 3). Gee's (2014) perspective, in addition to what he called core identity, was that we all have a number of identities that exist in interaction with others (Gee, 2014). His treatment of identity was closely linked to the discourse concepts he had developed. He described discourse as the application of language as a way of communicating, creating and maintaining values and social conditions within particular surroundings. He linked discourse to social (sub) groups and to their languages: What is it that signals that you are inside or outside a given group or network of meaning? Gee (2015) distinguished between *discourse* with a lowercase "d" and *Discourse* with a capital "D." He referred to everyday language in the broad sense as discourse, while Discourse referred to a larger network of meaning:

A Discourse with a capital "D" is composed of distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading coupled with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing, with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognizable activities (Gee, 2015, p. 155).

We emphasised the distinction drawn by Gee in our analyses. We found clear signs corresponding to the ideal notion of *good Norwegian childhood*. The social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad, among others, scrutinised this notion (Gullestad, 1996, 1997; Sanderud & Gurholt, 2014). It is this *Discourse* about *the good Norwegian childhood* that appeared to dominate the letters. At the same time, we are aware that labels such as typically Norwegian, Norwegian, non-Norwegian are fluid and by no means constant. Here, we draw on the work of Norwegian sociologist Anders Vassenden, who claimed that researchers are often unclear about what aspects of Norwegianness/non-Norwegianness are referred to in analyses of people's identification and categorisation of the self and others (Vassenden, 2010, 2011). "Understandings of 'Norwegianness' and 'non-Norwegianness' can be seen as multiple discursive oppositions" (Vassenden, 2011, p. 157). In this article, we follow Vassenden (2011) in his view, on Norwegianness as not being an exact concept.

A narrative research approach

Most of us become familiar with communicating and interpreting narratives in different genres from an early age. A narrative approach is thus about studying something that is everyday and universally present (Bo, Christensen, & Lund Thomsen, 2016; Frosh & Phoenix, 2001). Narratives are important for the construction of our identities; we both create and tell others about ourselves through autobiographical narratives (Phoenix, 2004). The students' narratives, as told in the letters, gave us as researchers insight into what they believe has influenced them and shaped who they are today (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007; M. Thomassen, 2006; W. E. Thomassen, 2016). The life stories told in the students' letters reflected their individual experiences, events in their pasts and the society the narrators were a part of. They also expressed a cultural discourse that we recognised and acknowledged that we are part of (Moen, 2013). The narratives were thus not just accounts of individuals' attitudes or experiences; they were also about the formation of social identity. Moen (2013) made this point in reference to Järvinen (2005), through their life stories the informants attempt to present themselves in certain ways. We use social strategies to negotiate and present ourselves as sensible, normal and respectable people (Moen, 2013, p. 44). What is included and excluded, respectively, from the presentations, how different events are seen in relation to each other and how this is interpreted not only depend on the individual, but also on the socio-historical context in which the events take place. As such, the narratives in the students' letters can be understood as micro-narratives that draw on broader cultural narratives. As Bruner (1990) pointed out, notions can be identified in the individual narratives about how we are expected to live our lives in the culture we are part of. He called these notions canonical narratives (Bruner, 1990). In this article, however, we use Gee's distinction between discourse and Discourse to capture this phenomenon (Gee, 2015).

Jolly and Stanley claimed that letters could be located ‘on the very borders of what constitutes a genre’ (Jolly & Stanley, 2005, pp. 97-113). The historian, Leskelä-Kärki, referring to several authors, pointed out that letters are not only historical sources, but they reveal a type of literacy as well. “Letters offer textual paths to explore how individuals construct themselves through language within a certain practice” (Leskelä-Kärki, 2008, p. 329). Though these scholars are deliberating letters from different goal in mind, our view of what letters represent are in concurrence with these scholars. We requested the student teacher to write these letters. They were written to an unknown receiver and were, in that manner fictional. In the study, we furthermore drew on the letter method. This method is relatively new in research, and to date, few qualitative studies have been based on this method. However, Sjøbakken (2012; 2017) used and wrote about this method in the Norwegian context, and context and pointed out that it is related to the teacher’s log. He also stated that the letter method can be regarded as somewhere in between an interview and a questionnaire. The informants are invited to share their thoughts and experiences in letter format. They decide how to form the letter, but the researcher provides guidelines about the content (Sjøbakken, 2012, 2017). The advantages of this method are that is relatively easy to administer and that work on the analysis can begin quickly because the data collection is complete as soon as the letters have been received (Berg & Thorbjørnsen, 1999). According to Berg and Thorbjørnsen (1999), the disadvantage of the letter method is that it is not possible to ask follow-up questions during the process, as in the case of interviews. It also relies on informants being able and motivated to express themselves in writing (Berg & Thorbjørnsen, 1999).

As already mentioned, we gave students the following guidelines: “Please write a letter to a stranger in which you present yourself and what has formed you and made you the person you are today.” These guidelines were intentionally wide thus the students could choose what to emphasize. This is in line with Berg and Thorbjørnsen (1999), recommendations.

Sample

The sample consisted of 67 students from two one-year postgraduate programme groups at two teacher education institutions. At the A-University, the programme in academic teaching, students must have either a bachelor’s or a master’s degree in natural science. The students at B-University attended a programme for vocational teaching. Before they start teacher education, they hold either a certificate of completed apprenticeship or a bachelor’s degree. They also have work experience from their respective vocations.

The students in these postgraduate programmes are usually older than students attending other kinds of teacher education programs. The students were in the 30–40 age bracket, and apart from one student, they were all of Norwegian or Western background. One student teacher was a second-generation immigrant. The letter from this student was different than the other letters. To simplify somewhat, it was about two cultures “on a

collision course” and about having to make choices as an adolescent within this conflict-ing context. As our material is limited, and there is a risk of anonymisation being compromised, we chose for ethical reasons not to incorporate this letter into our material. The students at B-university submitted their letters (approximately 1 A4 page) on the learning platform Fronter, and they were therefore not anonymous. The students from A-university handed in handwritten letters (approximately 1–1.5 A4 pages). Some of the students from A-university wrote letters under their full names, but the majority chose to be anonymous. Some chose to state their ages, while others did not. This means that it is not possible to say whether there are age or gender differences with respect to the scope and content of the letters. The students were informed about the purposes of the letter writing, both the educational objective and the research component. The students could decide whether their letters would be included in the study. All of the students who wrote letters chose to take part in the study.

In this project, we also were participants and had a number of roles, being both teacher educators and researchers. We set the letter-writing assignment and we analysed the letters. Our perspective was not impartial but influenced by our standpoints and our experiences. This perspective is culturally contingent, and we are also part of the privileged majority: white, born and raised respectively in Norway and Iceland. We also have university degrees and belong to the middle class. In relation to our students, the letter writers, we were in a position of power. The students were aware that we would be reading and analysing the letters. Anderson and Herr (1999) propose five quality criteria for research on own practice. By giving the students an assignment with wide guidelines (instead of for instance interviewing them) we emphasized two of these quality criteria's: Democratic validity denoting the approach research is conducted with the collaboration of all the parties with interests in the problem under exploration. And catalytic validity aiming at the activity that is carried out stimulates reorienting and revitalising better understanding of reality in order to remodel it (Anderson & Herr, 1999).

All quotes from the letters and literature, written in Norwegian, were translated to English by the authors. The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

Results

Data analysis

In the analyses, we drew on the work of the American sociologist Catherine K. Riessman. She claimed that the narrative method and analysis are a generic term for methods that are used to interpret texts that share a narrative form. Riessman and Quinney, (2005) pointed out that narrative inquiry is concerned with the content of what is said, written, or visually shown (Riessman & Quinney, 2005). Riessman and Quinney (2005) applied three key analysis perspectives: thematic, structural and performative analysis.

These three perspectives concur with the interrogative pronouns what, how and why: *what* are the narratives about? (thematic), *how* are the narratives told? (structural) and *why* are the narratives told? (performative).

We drew on thematic analysis, which means that we focused on the content of the letters. In line with Riessman and Quinney (2005), we were more concerned with capturing what had been told rather than how and why it had been told (Riessman & Quinney, 2005). Riessman and Quinney (2005) emphasised that narrative thematic analysis does not require the researcher to follow predefined formal procedures in the analysis work. We started the analytical process with repeated read-throughs of the letters. This enabled us to identify recurring themes that stood out as interesting and important. We found several everyday narratives, which, following Gee (2015), we called discourses. In the next phase, we looked for what appeared to characterise the discussion of these themes. We primarily looked for the main tendencies and connections and how these individual discourses could be incorporated into a larger social and cultural Discourse (Gee, 2015; Moen, 2013). This was also in line with Gullestad (1996), who said that life narratives are not only formed by lived lives and the social and cultural factors that have influenced them but that they are also influenced by deep-rooted notions and expectations about what is regarded as a good life. This phase of the analysis resulted in findings that have many common characteristics with the *Discourse on the good Norwegian childhood* (Frønes, 1998; Gullestad, 1996b, 1997; Hennum, 2015; Sanderud & Gurholt, 2014). We then looked for letters that deviated from these main tendencies. We also looked for aspects that were not thematised at all or only to a very limited extent. Here, we particularly sought to thematise the new, institutionalised childhood, described as a childhood, where kindergarten, school and after-school care play an important role in children's upbringings (Frønes, 1998; Kolle, 2005).

Findings and discussion

In line with Gee's (2014) distinction between discourses with a capital 'D' and a small 'd', we were concerned with investigating how the students' accounts could be seen in light of Discourses, a larger network of meaning. Our findings can be briefly summarised as follows: The students cited their families as being their most important formative factor, facilitating a safe and active childhood. Their childhood activities took place in nature. Emphasis was also placed on where they grew up, with nature a mere "all-weather boot" step away, and where bicycle locks were unnecessary. Such places were often small and offered limited educational opportunities. Many of the letter writers, therefore, had to break apart and move away from their families at an early age. These moves were mostly portrayed as positive and as expanding the individual's horizons. In addition to these three main findings, we chose to include the few fleeting indications in which the letter writers reflected on their personal experiences of being in a privileged position. These are discussed under the heading "Self and the others." In the following sections, we use excerpts from the letters to illustrate the findings.

Family

The family was a recurring topic in all of the letters. Most of the letters actually started with this topic. A few limited themselves to a brief description of the family situation they grew up in: “I grew up with my mother, father and two brothers.” It is hard to think of anybody that would not specify their family and home as their most formative factor. The majority of the letter writers elaborated on how and in what way they believed their families had formed them. In these narratives about the family, we found the theme of spending time in nature. Families going for walks in forests and in the mountains was a recurring theme and that is what we found interesting. Another feature of the narratives was that the family was emphasised as a motivator and facilitator for the active child, which is illustrated by the following excerpt:

We were out in nature a lot and learned how to use it, and my curiosity was probably well developed already as a child. My family’s interest in sports gave us a shared platform, a sense of solidarity and security. We went for many walks in the forest and the mountains in our free time.

The family was mentioned as the most important factor, and the school or other social institutions were not mentioned other than as an institution that could step in when a family was struggling. This is illustrated by the following excerpt:

For as long as I can remember, my parents have always been sceptical about other people who have a different first language, religion, culture and skin colour than they have. They have expressed attitudes and values to me and my siblings that would now be regarded as racist.

The same letter writer described lacking good role models at home and how the school became the arena in which she was able to develop social competence and skills:

I was completely dependent on a school system that focused on both social competence and skills, as well as having an academic focus. This focus gave me some essential socialisation tools, which most other people took for granted. Clear and secure adults helped me to acquire social skills that enabled me to cooperate with other people, become independent/self-reliant and responsible. These skills created a foundation that enabled me to benefit from my education.

Surprisingly, we found a few other traces of what has been described as the institutionalisation of childhood (Frønes, 1998; Kalle, 2005). The participants in the study were born in 1979-1989. Statistics show that in the 70s, many children (age 3-5) were enrolled in kindergarten and more than half of the children born in the 80s attended kindergarten. All participants started compulsory school the year they turned seven (Engel, Barnett, Anders, & Taguma, 2015).

In the accounts, families’ social and financial resources and privileges were hardly touched upon as a theme. We found only a few sporadic traces of these themes. Both in their own way, the following two excerpts were characteristic of the thematisation of social and financial resources: “I grew up in a loving and secure working-class family.” While another letter writer provided a more detailed description:

I suppose I took everything for granted, but I don't feel that I take a good life for granted as an adult. Our family culture was too educated for that, and we knew that our life wasn't for everyone. Well, for everyone or most of the people where we lived, but not elsewhere in the world.

This letter writer stood out from the vast majority in that he clearly acknowledged that his childhood was privileged as seen from a global perspective.

Self and others

We only found a few sporadic traces of the letter writers reflecting on their privileged childhoods. In the following excerpt, these privileges are lifted from the framework of the family to the societal level:

The culture I have grown up in has also given me an opportunity to be autonomous and think independently, but what have I "missed out on?" I try not to take the narratives of our culture for granted. By understanding aspects of my own life, I have become very curious about yours.

In this letter, the writer used the concept of culture. The concept was otherwise rarely used in the 67 letters. This letter writer also stood out because she directly addressed the unknown person: "Who are you and why? What are you doing to get to know yourself as a future teacher?"

Another letter writer, who, like the preceding one, directly addressed the unknown person, highlighted what she believed they have in common: "You and I have grown up in two different worlds. You with your family at your back and your culture, and I with mine. We have that in common." While this letter writer emphasised similarities, other letter writers highlighted differences:

I grew up in a society in which we can freely express our opinions, and where we can largely live our lives the way we want. We all get to go to school to learn about everything from the different subjects to what the world is like and what we want it to be like. We learn about philosophy, history, rights, values and perspectives on humanity.

Here, we see an example of how a distinction is drawn between self and the other, where the assumption is that the other has not enjoyed the same, good conditions as this writer has. A distinction is drawn between *the good Norwegian childhood* and the other's childhood.

The home

In most of the letters, we saw that another theme was the place in which the letter writers grew up. A striking difference in these descriptions was the way in which the letter writers described and attached importance to the kinds of places they grew up in. The letter writers who had grown up in towns and cities were content to state the name of the place, which the following quote exemplifies: "I was born in Oslo and grew up there." Those who had grown up in rural surroundings, on a farm or a small village appeared to attach greater significance to place. These letter writers wrote in more detail about where

they grew up. An important feature of these descriptions was the emphasis that was placed on contact with family and relatives. The following excerpt is typical of these narratives: “I grew up in a small community where there was no tarmac and where I was related to all my neighbours.” This letter writer added an aspect that we found in many of the letters, i.e. the sense of security she felt when growing up where they did: “It was a safe environment where I could trust everyone and where I didn’t buy my first bicycle lock until my bike was stolen when I moved to town to study.” This feeling of security was expressed in different ways, and it was not limited to letter writers from a rural background, which the following excerpt is an example of: “I grew up in a quiet residential area in safe surroundings.”

Narratives about leaving the place they had grown up in were a recurring theme in many of the letters. Without exception, all the letter writers from a rural background wrote about this theme. We found reports of them having to leave their home community when they had completed lower secondary school. Others stated that they were encouraged to move out to study. Some mentioned instances of leaving home because of studies, pupil/student exchanges and fieldwork abroad. Travel, both short and longer durations, to foreign countries was also mentioned. A number of the letters explicitly mentioned the new cultural impulses they had gained that helped make them the people they are today.

Another key feature of the portrayal of the home place was the emphasis placed on the immediate proximity to nature: “Nature was our playground, and it lay just a few ‘all-weather boot steps’ beyond the ditches between the houses. It was carefree and magical.”

Discourse on the good Norwegian childhood

So far, we have presented what appears to characterise the content of the letters. These presentations constitute what we, in line with Gee (2015), can designate as a discourse in everyday language: what the individuals believe has made them who they are today. In the following, we seek to incorporate the cultural frames of reference, *discourses*, the students’ narratives appear to draw on into a larger network of meaning, or *Discourse*. The letters revealed to what extent the students are inside or outside a given group or network of meaning.

In the letters, we saw how the narratives denoted a *Discourse*, described by social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad (1996a, 1997, 2006), among others. Gullestad (2006) stated that *Norwegian childhood* appears to have a few clearly distinctive features. She claimed that we can “almost talk about childhood as a part of a Norwegian national identity” (Gullestad, 2006, p. 42). In this distinctive Norwegian narrative, the child is regarded as the family’s private property. Gullestad (1997) illustrated this by referring to the small, heart-shaped “don’t touch me” (author’s translation) clips that people hang on baby prams. This is in line with the students’ descriptions of the significance of their families. Another phenomenon that was emphasised in the letters was the significance of *trygghet* (security), a concept that is so distinctively Norwegian that it is difficult to convey the

significance and context in which the term is used in other languages (Gullestad, 1997). As we have shown, the places they grew up in were also an important element of the letters. As for the theme of family, the home place is included in the *Discourse on the good Norwegian childhood*. Gullestad pointed out that “being Norwegian means one comes *from* a ‘particular place’ (Gullestad, 2006, p.45; authors’ translation).

The students’ descriptions of nature as an important arena for active children to explore resonates strongly with Gullestad’s (2006) and other researchers’ highlighting of the strong link between the child and nature in the *Discourse* of the Norwegian (Sanderud & Gurholt, 2014). In the letter writers’ memories, a good childhood ideally took place close to nature, they only had to take one step in their Cherrox boots [all-weather boots]. Nature was a recurring theme in the letters, both in its own right and as an aspect of the themes of family and the home place. We considered the theme of nature as an example of how the students’ own narratives could be used to increase their awareness of cultural frames of reference and perspectives that are taken for granted. Nature seems to be assigned an important role and seen as a precondition for a good Norwegian life. The importance of nature has also been strongly emphasised in political rhetoric and in the authorities’ initiatives to promote greater participation in outdoor activities (Klima- og miljødepartementet, 2016; Sanderud & Gurholt, 2014).

Several ministries and other governmental and municipal bodies have highlighted outdoor activities and spending time in nature as an important element of Norwegian culture (Fjørtoft & Reiten, 2003). This is illustrated by the following quote: “The Government wishes to preserve outdoor activities as a living and important part of Norway’s cultural heritage and national identity, and as an important means of improving everyone’s quality of life and health” (Klima- og miljødepartementet, 2016, p.7 – authors’ translation). In the same report, a repeatedly expressed concern was that everyone does not take advantage of the opportunity to spend time in nature (Klima- og miljødepartementet, 2016). This concern applied to the immigrant population in particular. The report directly linked multiple instances of time spent in the outdoors with integration (Norwegianisation): Stating that for people with an immigrant background, outdoor activities can be a good path to inclusion and understanding Norwegian society.

This emphasis on nature can also be found in important governing documents for schools. This was particularly apparent in many of the school subjects that the students became qualified to teach.

Emphasis was also placed on the role of nature in the specialist literature that deals with the conditions that are assumed to be ideal for children to grow up in, as well as in educational and didactic literature (Skår & Krogh, 2009; Frøyland, 2010; Henderson & Vikander, 2007; Jegstad, Gjølterud, & Sinnes, 2017). Jegstad, Gjølterud and Sinnes, (2017) claimed that:

In Norway, nature has played an important role in the lives of the people” (Frøyland, 2010) and Norway is recognised internationally as a green country with strong outdoor traditions (Henderson & Vikander, 2007). However, the same trend with less nature experience among children is also observable here, mostly due to social factors related to time pressure (Jegstad et al., 2017, p. 2).

Here we identified a tendency that appears to persist in the Discourse on the importance of nature as core of Norwegian identity. We share Sanderud and Gurholt's (2014) objections to such idealisation of a happy childhood in close contact with nature. It does not take into account the fact that the extent of a family's outdoor activities depends on a number of socio-economic factors, such as education, income and access to a cabin (Sanderud & Gurholt, 2014; Vaage, 2009). We consider the theme suitable for raising our awareness of our culturally contingent perspectives. We have previously referred to Moen (2013), who pointed out that life stories convey more than just individual experiences. Such stories also say something about historical events and the society the narrator is a part of (Moen, 2013).

Implications

Following three questions have steered this study:

- What can the letters communicate about who the students are and the experiences they believe have formed them?
- How do the students present themselves in the letters?
- Which cultural frames of reference do the students' narratives appear to draw on?

The letters revealed to what extent the students are inside or outside a given group or network of meaning. Through reading the letters written by the students, we scrutinised how they presented themselves to a stranger and what they emphasised in the letters. In the students' narratives, the home place seems to create a sense of security and the family that facilitated activities and experiences in nature. It makes sense that the theme of nature can increase awareness of Norwegian majority perspectives. As already mentioned, nature has an important position in official documents, in the students' subject areas and last, but not least, in the narrative about the Norwegian people. *Nature* was prominent in the letters as a cultural frame the students draw on in order to describe a happy childhood. This is an example of how students' own life stories can be used as a starting point to prepare them for intercultural school practices, which is one of the goals of teacher education (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2015). We believe that the students can gain greater self-awareness of and the ability to reflect more on their own attitudes and values by this kind of letter writing. The themes of the letters can be topics from discussions in order to raise awareness of majority privileges in teacher education. The student teachers will meet pupils with different narratives and other cultural frames of reference that diverge from their own. With reference to other researchers, Harnes claimed that the dominating Norwegian ideology of equality can lead to differences being "ignored, made invisible and stereotyped, while 'the implicitly Norwegian' is considered correct" (Harnes, 2016, p. 129, authors' translation).

The letter method can also be used as a self-reflection tool. Writing is used in autobiographical approaches to research (Pithouse-Morgan, Khau, Masinga, & van de Ruit,

2012). According to Ellis (2004) “The personal and its relationship to culture, it is an autobiographic genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness” (cited in Hamilton, Smith & Worthington, 2009 p.22). We believe that this can also apply to student teachers and their explorations of their own perspectives. The letter method can also be linked to Dysthe and colleagues’ emphasis on writing as a learning strategy: “Writing helps us to see new connections and it reveals any lack of context and understanding” (Dysthe, Hertzberg & Hoel, 2000 p.12) (authors’ translation). There is no shortcut to unlearning the ideas, attitudes and values that students or teacher educators have acquired (Harnes, 2016). Our intention was not to deprive the students of their own individual experiences or affiliation with the Norwegian. Rather, on the basis of these narratives, we could reflect on how they can influence their encounters with a stranger (Phillion & He, 2004). We linked this to the intercultural perspective, which, as already mentioned, is, in essence, the idea of interpersonal interaction, mutual dependence and cooperation (Børhaug & Helleve, 2016; Portera, 2008). We have previously cited researchers who claimed that work on intercultural practices should start by raising awareness of the privileges and taken for granted perspectives that come with membership of a majority (Dervin et al., 2012; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Santoro & Forghani-Arani, 2015).

The analyses we carried out in this study cannot be generalised. They do not tell us what all Norwegian students teacher feel has formed them. We, therefore, believe it is important to ask every new group of student teachers the same question. The students can then, in pairs and groups, analyse the contents of their letters. We believe that the results of these analyses can be a suitable way of raising awareness of their own viewpoints when they encounter intercultural school practices. Our empirical data are from a limited Norwegian context, but our hope is that this study could inspire to further explorations on the issues of cultural and linguistic complexity in teacher education in other Scandinavian contexts and even other countries.

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